

Supplement to Baca NWR Gas and Oil Exploration
Environmental Assessment
Finding of No Significant Impact
Re: Gunnison's Prairie Dog

Background

Detailed analysis of the effects of this project on the Gunnison's prairie dog was inadvertently omitted from the *Finding of No Significant Impact for the Final Environmental Assessment of Planned Gas and Oil Exploration, Baca National Wildlife Refuge, Saguache County, Colorado*, issued on October 20, 2008. This supplement to the Finding of No Significant Impact is intended to disclose impacts to this species that is now a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The Gunnison's prairie dog had no special status as of the publication of the draft environmental assessment in January 2008. In February 2008 a notice entitled *Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; 12 Month Finding on a Petition to List the Gunnison's Prairie Dog as Threatened or Endangered* was published in the Federal Register. Although the Final Environmental Assessment acknowledges that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) was preparing this 12 month finding it does not recognize that the Service did in fact find the Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) in the montane portion of its range warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Listing is precluded due to higher priorities. Consequently it is considered a "Candidate" for listing and a proposed listing rule will be developed when priorities allow. (Federal Register. 2008a. US Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Service, Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; 12-Month Finding on a Petition To List the Gunnison's Prairie Dog as Threatened or Endangered, Tuesday, February 5, 2008, p. 6660 to 6684, 50 CFR Part 17, <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/gunnisonprairiedog/>. Site accessed November 12, 2008.)

Detailed Analysis

The Gunnison's prairie dog in the montane portion of its range is considered a candidate for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act. The species is comprised of two range portions - the prairie and montane. The montane portion of the range is generally described as the San Luis Valley, Gunnison Basin and South Park in Colorado, extending south into north-central New Mexico. It is found in gently sloping grasslands and semi-arid and montane shrub lands at 6,000 to 12,000 feet in elevation. Grass is the most important food item, mixed occasionally with forbs, sedges and shrubs. The montane portion of the range is the only segment determined to be warranted for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service due to the (1) higher incidence of plague epizootics (a disease affecting many animals of one kind at the same time) in the more moist montane climate, (2) smaller populations that have shown little recovery from epizootics and (3) limited potential for recolonization after epizootics due to small colony size and

mountainous geography. The Federal Register Notice identifies sylvatic plague as "the only significant factor affecting the future conservation of the species." (Federal Register, 2008a)

The Baca National Wildlife Refuge is the site of a number of Gunnison's prairie dog colonies and therefore the potential for this species to occur within the project area is considered high. The only colony within the exploration project area is approximately three miles to the north-northwest of Lexam's northern most well site. This small colony of approximately two acres in size is on either side of the main access or "Lexam" road that is used by refuge staff, refuge permittees and by Lexam. Two larger colonies are located outside of the project area around the "Cattle Headquarters" and refuge headquarters, 3 miles to the north and 3.5 miles to the northeast respectively. (Baca NWR files)

The colony within the project area is coincidentally located adjacent to the road crossing on the Crestone Creek lateral, already identified as a sensitive area due to the presence of Rio Grande suckers and Rio Grande chubs in the lateral. The colony will benefit from measures currently identified to protect this sensitive site such as those included in protective measure No. 15 establishing a 0.25 mile buffer zone of no activity around sucker and chub habitat, and suppressing dust near waterway crossings. Shooting, poisoning and habitat fragmentation can impact small Gunnison prairie dog colonies. Existing refuge regulations and practices protect this colony from these impacts. Although gas and oil exploration activities that follow the existing protection measures included in the environmental assessment will not likely affect the colony along the Lexam Road, it will be a priority for environmental monitoring to determine if the refuge manager needs to implement additional, emergency measures.

I have determined that the additional information regarding the Gunnison's prairie dog does not change my original finding on October 20, 2008. The imposition of the terms and conditions on time, place and manner of exploration will not unreasonably interfere with the exploration of Lexam's mineral estate, and exploration conditioned by these terms will not have a significant impact on the human environment associated with the surface estate of the Baca NWR and the preparation of an environmental impact statement on the proposed action is not required.



Regional Director

11/19/08
Date